

Like needles piercing skin by HoshisamaValmor

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Summary: Neil doesn't take Billy's rebellious act too well. Max doesn't take Neil's reaction too well. Takes place sometime before the beginning of season 3.

Like needles piercing skin

Warnings: Violence / abuse and mentions of it happening before, aka child abuse.

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Max probably drifted off at some point while casually re-reading one of her comics. She guessed it by how the rustle slowly crept around her and she slowly became aware of it, not really sure for how long it was going on or remembering when she started to notice it. Max blinked and pushed off the sleepy idleness, quickly finding it replaced with uneasy goosebumps all over her skin.

The loudness was muffled by her bedroom door, making the words unclear and sound just like a thunderous background rumble, but Max knew by heart how it wouldn't take much effort at all to find sense in them. It was hard *not* to do that, like the heavy weight on her stomach would only leave her if she made sure exactly what was going on. It actually never really helped, though.

"... -hell you want more from me, Dad?!"

"Who do you think you're talking to, Billy?"

"What the hell do you want more? I do everything you tell me to, I get a job to pay for *my* things, so *you* won't keep wasting your money on me, but it's still not good enough, is it?"

"Don't you dare-!"

There was a loud banging sound, like something had been thrown against something else - against the bookshelf in the living room, she realized by the distinctive clinking of the jar Mom had on one of the shelves and that shattered loudly on the floor and jolted Max off the bed - and a sound of a hit and a grunt that nailed her feet to the floor and her eyes to the door.

It had been a while since this happened. She wasn't fully naive to believe it hadn't happened at all for the past few weeks, but maybe it

did when she wasn't home (not really likely though, 'cause Billy didn't really spend that much time at home without her, specially now that he had started working but still drove her to school and back). Her breathing stopped against her will, held up to make sure she'd hear anything coming from outside the door.

Dad's voice toned down considerably, but although Max could still tell he was speaking, the words were completely lost.

"I didn't do anything wrong," Billy's words were clearer than Dad's. "Alright? I didn't do-"

The violence of the second shove pushed Max's feet forward and she opened the door.

The first person she saw was Mom, standing on the other side of the living room. Her head turned in surprise towards Max, and she said something in a soft voice that Max didn't really catch but she could guess what it was. She turned to the side, seeing that Dad had cut the words he had started to say and looked at her over his shoulder, a frown quickly forming over his eyebrows. Billy turned to her as well, and although the borderline scowl on his face was too familiar, Max saw how different his eyes were, how different they turned his whole face from angry to hurt. His father's hands were firmly shut around the front of his shirt and pinning him against the bookshelf.

"Max, go to your room," Dad said, the edge of irritation not completely off of his voice.

She felt words bubble and get strangled on her throat, only one managing to come out.

"What-"

"Max, go to your room."

"I said, go to your room."

Max cowered against her will for how both Billy and Dad's voices were pretty much synced to perfection; yet they sounded completely different. They had been both immediate to react and give the same order, but one wanted to keep her from being there to see that, and

the other didn't want her being a nuisance. And Max realized which one of them had said it with a surprising clarity.

"Maxine." Her mother's voice pulled her gaze and Max saw her giving an encouraging nod towards her room, a weak smile attempting to be reassuring and not authoritarian or angry. Rather than cower back, Max actually felt a sudden pang of anger towards Mom. Was she really just gonna keep standing there, watching? For what? To see how bad it'd turn out?

Max planted her feet on the floor, turning from Dad back to Mom, her gaze sharp, angry, hurt, trying to incite her to do something, *anything*, but Mom didn't seem to understand. So instead Max turned back to Dad, who inhaled sharply.

"Max, I won't say again. Go to your room."

"What did he do this time?" she asked, and her intention was clear in her mind: demand a reasonable answer from Dad, something that would be really serious to actually justify this. But the anger of her words could easily be interpreted as disdain, as a mockery, and she flinched when she saw it on Billy's face; how he felt it that way, and her mouth gaped as she struggled to correct herself. "I mean, why-"

"Max, this has nothing to do with you."

"I was startled by your screams," Max stood her ground. Even if it was probably best that Dad hadn't taken the meaning she actually intended with her previous words, Max still felt something burning her, scaring her, hurting her, and it had been growing ever since she had stopped Billy from hurting her friends. Billy, who now stood silent, pushed against the bookshelf with a broken vase on his feet. "What did-"

"Max..." Dad said, his voice low, letting go of Billy's shirt and turning. Max felt a chill run down her back; the same exact one she'd feel when Billy would say her name that way. "Where is this coming from now?"

Max knew, but she didn't get a chance to say anything. Just as Dad had barely taken a step forward, he halted abruptly and she couldn't

understand why. She saw how his face remained calm, controlled, yet he breathed sharply through his nose again. He turned back at Billy.

"Have you taken the day to push me, Billy? Have you?"

Max couldn't see Dad's face from where she was, but she could see Billy's. That previous scowl was fully gone, and he just looked scared, younger, like someone else but her stupid step-brother. And she hated it how it made her feel.

Billy's hand dropped from Dad's arm and fell against the side of his hip.

"I've got a job. I'm good at it. I make my own money, Dad. I didn't do anything wrong."

In between the moment both Dad and Billy were quiet, Mom finally spoke, even if barely above a whisper.

"Neil, maybe you can talk with Billy later-"

"Susan, mind your own business!" It could've been Dad saying that, but it wasn't. Max barely had time to feel the unease in her gut being replaced by anger for Billy's words, before she felt rather than saw the flash of rage that crossed Dad's face and he slapped Billy so violently across the face it made Max flinch back.

"Who do you think you're talking to?!" He grabbed Billy's shirt again and shoved him back hard, making him groan out in pain.

"Dad!" No one heard her; not even herself, her heart pumping deafeningly on her ears.

"Is this the kind of education I gave you?! Is this how I taught my son? I already put up with your goddamn hellish music, your whores, now this delinquent teenage bullshit, and you *dare* speak to her like that?!"

Mom cowered for a second before Max saw her move, but she could find no relief in her finally reacting because she immediately paced towards Max, closing her hand around Max's arm tightly.

"Maxine, go to your room, please."

"Mom-" she tried, turning her head when she heard Dad hit him again and saw Billy fall heavily on the floor.

"For God's sake, do as we tell you to, Maxine!" Mom told her more sharply. Max caught herself wondering if she finally raising her voice was to muffle the cries just next to them. It didn't really work.

The door shut tight in front of her face didn't work either, and instead all it did was make her breathing grow anxious and short, tears gathering at the sides of her vision.

It wasn't as if it was the first time Max had seen it. Granted, it hadn't been many; not as many as the ones she heard through closed bedroom doors, at least. She was understandably terrified the first time, but after a while, and specially when Billy bullied her constantly and it only became worse as they grew up, she often found how she felt a sick pleasure in it. Max would sometimes actually be glad Dad was so harsh to him, cutting him off at the smallest thing, calling him off that shit high horse he always put himself on, roughening him up like he did other kids, like a taste of his own medicine. But it quickly grew to also lace another thing rather than anger; an uneasiness for how sometimes it wasn't justified or understandable. Sometimes it was there just *because*. What *did* Billy do this time? He hadn't been a shithead lately, not above average. Max had heard some older girls at school comment on him and although it made her roll her eyes and scoff, between their gross comments on his physique and hotness and whatnot, they did make it sound he was actually taking his job seriously. That could be a surprising fact, but maybe he really was committed at having some more financial and personal freedom.

It took some minutes for the shouting to stop, and Max was glad because not even that was muffling Billy's grunts of pain. She had sunk in bed by then, and she remained there when she heard the front door slam shut. The car engine roared to life and drove off, a common disclosure of these more violent confrontations. She wasn't sure where Mom had gone to, but she heard Billy slam his bedroom door a short while later. Max was holding her breath again without noticing it, and so she trembled when she heard something break in

his room. She couldn't tell what it was. Not long after, a loud rock music started blaring and drowned everything else.

Max's legs had started to cramp from how tightly she was holding them against her chest, and slowly, she unlaced and crossed them, looking at the door again and trying to figure out what she was going to do.

It didn't take long, even though it wasn't as immediate as before. Sniffing and drying the signs of tears that had slowly crawled a trail on each side of her cheeks, Max stood up, but stopped in front of her door, now wondering if she was going to do this. While normally she chose to ignore it, to put on some music of her own or read or jump outside and skateboard on their yard, ever since Christmas, that unsettling that overcame her revenge wish on Billy had increased. (It kinda felt like it was for nothing though, because last time Max tried anything, Billy had a relapse into his full old self, trashing all the progress they had been making in tolerating each other and keeping the boundaries Max had demanded with a nail-covered baseball bat. Odds were it wouldn't be different this time).

But her resentment for him had gradually lowered despite it all. Probably more than it should. Even if it *was* Billy, and he could still be pretty shitty despite the noticeable efforts, she didn't feel as angry with him all the time.

Still, Max was arguably really pushing her luck her and trashing those efforts by getting out of her room and knocking on his. Billy didn't answer. Gathering up strength with the help of the breath she took in, Max moved her face closer to the door.

"Billy." Not knowing what else to say, she left it at that. There was no reply. The Metallica cassette kept roaring.

Max looked at the door again, raising her hand to knock. Her fist remained still in the air and she pressed her lips together. What was she going to say to him, anyway? 'Are you alright?', 'Are you hurt?', 'Do you need anything?'. She knew the answer to all those.

She tried calling him again, louder this time. Her hand fell over the doorknob, and she tentatively grabbed at it. It turned under her palm.

"Max!" Billy shouted when she pushed the door open, making him jolt up on his bed. The music was very loud. "Jesus, learn some respect for other people's privacy!"

"I called you," she replied defensively, and it wasn't a lie. She kind of didn't step inside though, fearing to be within holding reach as she saw Billy quickly scrub at his face with the back of his hand. Something got caught in a lump on her throat again and she swallowed it down, looking at the floor as he sniffed, kinda to give him the privacy he had mentioned.

"Get out of my room, Max."

"What happened?" she asked, and the weight of her previous word choice felt heavier in comparison. Maybe she should have said it that way before, instead of making it as if she was being accusing, and this time, it really came across the way she wanted it.

Billy stood up and walked up to her but Max didn't flinch. *'Plant your feet'*.

"Max, get out of my room!"

"Did you lose your job?" she tried, and she did add a note of scoff to her voice then, trying to lighten it up, to turn this unusual breaking into Billy's room (technically, a standing on the outside of an open door wasn't a breaking in, *but...*) into something more familiar between them. He grabbed the door but Max pushed back.

"Of course I didn't lose my job. Leave me alone."

"What happened?" she insisted again, quickly glancing at his bare torso and back up again - of course he had scattered his shirt, and if he did it because he wanted to check for damage in the mirror, he did have it, some patches of red that would start to grow into unpleasant colors that would require a change of outfit at work if he wanted to keep them to himself and not letting other people see them. That included her in the present moment, and she saw how his face grew angry.

"Get out, Max!"

"Will you just talk to me?!" her voice raised so suddenly it caught even her by surprise, quickly toning herself back down before she provoked the reaction Billy had last time. "Billy, maybe if you just... Did he like, accuse you of something because of your job, or-"

"I don't need anyone telling me what to do. I didn't get a job because of him, or anyone else."

"Uh, yeah, technically, you did," Max pointed out, shrugging lightly even if she saw the glare Billy immediately threw at her. It *was* true, regardless or not Max had indeed heard Dad tell Billy multiple times how he had to "do something decent with his sorry life and get a job like a normal person"; even if that hadn't been said, Billy would've got a job to save money to get out of there because of Dad, first and foremost. Max knew that was his goal for a long time.

"Get out," he grabbed Max's hand, still holding the doorknob, and yanked it off. The movement made her flinch, but it did also show his arm, and at first, she thought he had a serious bruise on the top of it, but then she realized the 'bruise' had a shape and it actually didn't look like a bruise at all.

"Whoa, what is *that*?"

"Get off my back, Max, seriously," Billy growled even before he realized what she was talking about, throwing the door, but Max pushed it with both hands.

"You've got a *tattoo*?" she couldn't stop herself from saying, and through her shock, the corners of her lips were actually curled upwards in awe. "Holy *fucking*-"

"Hey! Language!" Billy threw at her. Max bit back the rest, but she kept smiling and wide-eyed. Billy's scowl softened somewhat at that.

"Whoa." That came out without her really noticing it. "Can I see it?"

"No, you idiot, you can't!"

"Did it hurt?" Max got on the tips of her toes to try and get a look at the tattoo, but Billy groaned and turned so she wouldn't.

"It's needles piercing fucking skin, shitbird."

"*Language*," Max echoed, frowning at him. Billy only scoffed again.

"Get out of my room already, Maxine."

The door banged shut and Max just stared at it, the smile still sillily planted on her lips. No *wonder* Dad had got so pissed off.

"I'm sure your fanbase at the pool will like it!" she said loudly to be heard over the music.

"Shut up!" he yelled back from inside.

She'd have plenty of opportunities to see exactly how the tattoo was; Billy hadn't been exactly subtle about it, it was on the *top* of his *arm*, for God's sake, and how often did Billy cover *that* up in the Summer, or ever? He knew it was impossible for Dad or Mom not to see it, but did it anyway. Now that she thought about it, it really was just a matter of time; *of course* Billy would want to have a tattoo. First salary he got wouldn't be enough to get out of Hawkins at all, but it was more than enough to get a tattoo done.

Like it or not, he had more tank tops than anything else in his wardrobe, and his right arm *was* facing Max when they sat on the car on the next morning. Max didn't really bother being subtle about her glances either. Billy didn't say anything, but she saw how he was pretty much steaming and kept tapping his thumb against on the steering wheel in irritation. Before he'd burst and yell at her, Max turned her face to the window.

"It's a pretty badass tattoo, I'll give you that."

Max could feel the side glance Billy threw at her and he scoffed loudly.

"Of course it is."

Max rolled her eyes and leaned back on the seat with her arms crossed, just imagining the drooling comments she'd hear at school.

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the end

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Author's Note: I don't feel like I wrote this with a third of the quality of other fics I've read, but it is what it is. I wanted to get this out before it started to bother my mind, and it also made me think back on some stuff under an interesting light. It was also interesting that, while I was planning this out on the subway, there was a father of two playing and being adorable next to me. It made for a nice contrast.

The shout Billy throws at Susan was because she was, in her own passive way, trying to intervene, and after Max's own intervention, it was stressing Billy out and so he wanted to keep them both out of it. Of course Max would be angry that he was shouting at her mother, specially because she didn't understand why he was being that way if they were trying to help.

Thank you for reading, feedback is appreciated.